THE CHEESE TIGER

By ERWIN HEIMANN

In our series of short stories of the nations we have endeavored to publish English translations of stories which are characteristic both of the literature and the spirit of each nation. The following Swiss story fulfills these requirements. Besides giving us a glimpse into the heart and mind of a Swiss mountaineer, it is typical of Switzerland's reflective literature, which is more interested in the mind and the emotions than in outward events.—K.M.

INSTEAD of choosing the easy road over the pass, I had let myself be enticed by the glorious day to take the route across the ridge; and in the joy of my lonely climb I had not bothered about the time.

Now I was racing with the twilight toward the valley over mountain pastures from which the herds had disappeared weeks ago. I had not taken the fact sufficiently into account that it was already October, and now I was faced by a night march in which I might easily lose my way unless I made up my mind to spend the night in one of the unoccupied herdsmen's huts.

In my haste I left the gently descending path to gain the valley by half running, half sliding through the steep mountain forest. I thought I would regain the path lower down. But instead of this, when I stepped out of the forest I saw a green hollow in front of me, protected on all sides by trees. The only sign of life was a single, weatherbeaten hut.

"This is where I could spend the night," I reflected and made my way toward the hut, when suddenly I noticed that a feeble light shone from the windows under the low roof. More surprised than pleased, I stopped. Not until now did I make out through the gathering dusk a man standing in front of the hut who had apparently seen me for quite some time and was looking toward me. Now I had even less reason to pass by the hut.

But when I had approached to within about ten paces of the silently waiting figure, my step faltered again. Why, wasn't that—? Yes, it was one of my militia comrades! The "cheese tiger!" The nickname by which he was known in my company flashed through my mind. I racked my brains for his real name. But in vain. So I simply held out my hand to him.

"Fancy meeting you here! What a bit of luck—why, don't you even recognize me?"

My question was quite justifiable. He looked at me suspiciously, almost with a scowl; then he looked beyond me again, into the darkening forest, as if he were on the lookout for someone. Finally, as if waking up, he grasped my outstretched hand.

"Of course I know you. You are the motor sergeant in our company."

"Yes, I bet you never expected me here, did you?" I chatted away, trying hard to cover up my frosty reception. "It isn't more than four months since the

company split up. And in a few weeks we'll be called up again."

"Yes, I suppose so," he replied absent-mindedly, still looking beyond me. Only after I had stood in front of him again for a while without speaking did he finally ask: "Do you want to spend the night here?"

"Thanks, I'd like to, if you have room," I admitted.

"I have another straw mattress," he muttered. "I suppose you might as well have it."

"Were you expecting someone?" I asked, a little uncertainly.

"Yes, for a long time—but now I needn't wait any longer." With a short, dry laugh he turned to enter the hut without bothering to see whether I was following him.

All this was not very inviting. But I thought I knew how to handle these mountain people. We had four of them in our company, unkempt, suspicious, taciturn fellows, all from the same remote village. The four of them always sat together, and it almost seemed as if they shut themselves off with a kind of fear from every contact with the surrounding world. Consequently, I had felt quite proud of the fact that I was on a friendly footing with them, particularly with the "cheese tiger." I was all the more disillusioned by this frosty reception. Could it be possible that these fellows were even harder to get along with in their accustomed surroundings than in the militia?

In any case, I had no call to run away. So I followed him gropingly into the darkness of the kitchen, which was only relieved by the dancing flames of the open hearth. The "cheese tiger" was kneeling in front of the fire, about to put on a few gnarled branches.

"I suppose you'd like some coffee," he said without looking at me.

Yes, I certainly would; but as he was now blowing into the fire with all his might, there was no necessity for me to answer. Indeed, the longer I stayed the more convinced did I become that I was a highly unwelcome guest. Nor was this impression lessened when my host pushed me into the small room, scantily lit by a kerosene lamp, and immediately left me again. "I have some work to do in the stable," he explained tersely.

But as I was genuinely tired and hungry, I squeezed in behind the table and began to unpack my rucksack. This gave me time to look around in the room, which contained no furniture besides the large stone stove, the table, and two bunks one over the other. But I discovered something very welcome: the name of the occupant. It was carved, several times even, into the dark wall between the windows. There was a Nägeli Hans, a Nägeli Arnold, and also an Alexander. Nägeli Arnold, yes, that was the fellow in my company. What a good thing I had discovered it! Now I no longer had to be ashamed of my bad memory. And I could hardly have addressed him as "cheese tiger."

For the origin of this nickname could not be a very pleasant recollection to its owner. We had been having theoretical instruction on questions of supplies and packing, so as to know what was most essential and indispensable for a soldier. "Well then," our captain repeated, "what do we think of before anything else? What is it that, above everything else, makes a soldier fit and ready to fight? What do you think—" the captain's voice was suddenly raised—"Sapper Nägeli?" After his previous explanation, what he obviously expected to hear was: "Ammunition."

The man who had so suddenly been called upon, surprised perhaps in a doze or anyway while his thoughts were wandering, jumped up: "Yes, sir!" He was clearly trying to remember the words he had last heard. After a short reflection, he said confidently: "Cheese, sir!"

Roars of laughter, in which even the captain joined, repudiated this opinion. The nickname which was soon coined kept the episode alive. And yet, when one thinks about it, the answer was not

nearly as silly seen from the point of view of the good Nägeli. I had had sufficient opportunity to find out what the hard but tasty mountain cheese meant to these people. They never failed to carry a piece of it with them; it seemed to them more important than bread, and in hours of need the four companions shared the last crumb among each other just as inveterate smokers share their last cigarettes. So it was by no means so incorrect for our Sapper Nägeli to call cheese the essential prerequisite for the fighting capacity of a soldier.

Now I heard my grumpy friend clattering about in the kitchen, and before long he entered with a steaming pot. He also placed some bread and a huge chunk of cheese in front of me. "There, help yourself if you like," he growled, "that's all I have."

"It is more than I dared to hope for half an hour ago," I laughed and poured myself some of the fragrant mountain coffee, made only with milk and coffee powder. "That was a lucky chance, to stumble on you like that," I added. "I thought the herds had left the upper slopes long ago."

My companion was just lighting his pipe, and he blew out such showers of sparks that I was afraid his wild, yellow mane would catch fire. Not until the first clouds of smoke were spreading under the low ceiling did he reply:

"Actually I should have left for winter quarters long ago, too," he confirmed. "But I happen to have been waiting, day after day." His blue eyes under the shaggy brows, which usually looked so good-natured, regarded me with a strangely gloomy expression.

"Who knows, perhaps you were waiting for me," I tried to joke.

"No, it wasn't you I was waiting for," he replied with scarcely veiled rudeness.

I began to feel annoyed. After all, if I was so unwelcome, I could look for another place to spend the night. How the devil was one to understand these cranky fellows? There I had believed that I was getting along fine with them. And I had always taken a special interest in this man, the "cheese tiger." Whenever possible, I had got him the much-sought-after post of assistant to the driver, as I knew him to be a very calm, reliable soldier. And now he was making it so unmistakably clear to me that my presence was extremely disagreeable to him. To put it mildly, it was unpleasant.

In a silence that weighed on me, I finished my meal. The inhospitable host had placed both his elbows on the table and was smoking as strenuously as if it were an extremely important job demanding all his attention. After I had lighted a cigarette, I asked him quietly:

"And now, shall I go on?"

Nägeli Arnold only turned his gaze toward me, without moving his head, which rested on his fists. "What makes you say that?" he asked.

"Because you make it quite clear that you would prefer me to," I explained frankly.

I had smoked half my cigarette before I got any further reply. Then it was all the more surprising: "What do you know about us, you who always live among people? You stick your noses all over the world, you want to know all about the most remote tribes. But you haven't the faintest idea about how some people live in our own country. You can't grasp the fact that life shapes us differently from you, and that we attach importance to things which apparently seem unimportant to you. For instance, a word, a promise."

"I can't remember that I—." I sought in vain to connect this reproach with myself. But he interrupted me with a heavy movement of his hand.

"No, not you. I suppose I'm not very polite. But when you live year in, year out, only with animals, you can't adjust yourself so quickly to humans. Try for a moment to imagine this life: winter quarters, middle slopes, upper slopes; then back again with the closing year, and your only company cows and calves

and Blässi, the dog. Once a week down to the village; once a year, on January 2, to a dance; and the weeks with the militia. And in between a lot of time for thinking and brooding. Is it any wonder if you go a bit balmy? Somebody else might have forgotten everything, might have stopped waiting long ago."

His last words were only mumbled, hardly intelligible. But suddenly I recalled his curious, searching look, which had struck me when I first saw him outside the hut. "So you've been expecting someone?" I asked.

"Yes, I have, for months now." His fists suddenly sank down onto the raw, knotted table top between us. "You expect to win first prize in a sweep, and all you get back is your stake. Can you imagine such a thing? Something like that happened to me today."

"That's tough luck, for you—and for me," I admitted with a smile.

"I'll say it is," he growled. "And this'll be just one more occasion for you to think that I'm a queer dog. That's what they think of us in the company, isn't it? That's why they laugh at us. But if I explained it to you, I think maybe you might be able to understand at least a little."

"Just as you like," I replied, trying hard to hide my curiosity.

"OF course, I'm not much good at telling a story," he began. "all I need for my cattle is a few words. But I wouldn't like you to think badly of me. And perhaps it'll help me to talk about it. Otherwise it'll choke me. For a whole year I've been thinking of nothing else. Yes, it is almost exactly a year ago, perhaps a fortnight earlier than now. The summer and autumn had been lonely, as always. As you saw for yourself—one only comes across this hut by chance. There is not even a path leading to it. There I was, sitting again at this table, smoking, wondering, and every now and again reading a little in the book that I had brought up here in the spring. Every spring I take along a book. Last year's was called *Mättelisep-pi*, and I had already read it several times from cover to cover. That's why I couldn't get up much of an interest in it any more.

"Suddenly—it was already quite dark outside, like now—someone knocked on the windowpane, very gently. Look, over there, in that square of glass I saw a head, a face—a girl's face. I quickly left the room to open the kitchen door. I don't even remember whether I asked her to come in. I believe she entered quite on her own. A little frightened and disheveled, she stood there in the kitchen and tried to explain to me how she had forgotten the time while picking flowers on the upper slope, and how she had lost her way in the dark.

"I didn't know what to say in reply and showed her into the room. She sat at the very spot where you are sitting now, and when I brought her coffee, cheese, and bread, she set to with an appetite. She didn't even have a rucksack with her. She was spending her holidays down in the hotel and hadn't left till after lunch. That's what she told me.

"Ah, what did I care about all that! I didn't want to know to what chance I owed it that she was blown in here like a flower out of season. I could only sit there and keep on staring at her when she wasn't looking. You know, she really was a darned nice girl, not very young but not old by any means. And friendly and sensible—I never thought a city girl could be like that. It wasn't a bit difficult to talk to her. I talked more in that one evening than I had for months, and the funny thing is, I liked to talk. I told her everything she wanted to know, and perhaps even more. At any rate, she suddenly laughed and said I was a rascal.

"When she had finished eating, she at once asked to be told the way down into the valley. She was afraid that they might be worried about her at the hotel. But it is difficult to explain the way from here, and at night it is quite im-

possible to find it. One just has to know it. So I offered to go down with her.

"But then—you know, I still can't understand it—we didn't go. Whether she was to blame or I, or whether it was that other something that can suddenly spring up between a man and a woman, I don't know. We went on talking—no, it wasn't just talking any more, it was a game, as if we were playing with fire. I felt as if I had woken up from a deep winter sleep to find a bright summer day, and words came to me which I had never thought of before.

"When I finally fixed up a bed for her, over there in the lower bunk, she only smiled. I collected all my blankets for her to lie on. I would only have had the bare straw left, and that, she said, wasn't fair was it?"

Nägeli Arnold looked across at the lower bunk, and there was a gentle smile on his face.

"There are some dreams which one doesn't like to tell," he continued slowly. He seemed to have lost the thread of his story and stared in front of him. But at last he roused himself. "The next morning she said to me: 'I'll come back to you next year, I promise I will.' And before she left me, over there in the forest, she repeated it."

He got up and went over to the stove, where he ponderously cleaned his pipe. After a while, I heard his voice again from the dark corner.

"Have you ever waited, for a woman, for some great happiness? I suppose you have, haven't you? But in your case, waiting like that is only part of your thinking. You people wait when you happen to have time. In my case, however, in my loneliness, waiting becomes life itself.

"There was nothing to distract me from this waiting. Remembering, wondering, waiting—it may seem incredible to you that one can fill a whole year with that; and what must seem even more incredible to you: it was a wonderful year. When we were called up in the winter, and I knew that I was in the same town as she, I didn't even wish to interrupt this time of waiting, although I knew where I could find her. I wanted her to come to me, and then—you know, in the city we are like cows on ice. It can't be helped.

"And then again, when I was back home, I was sometimes tempted to curse my shyness. Waiting became almost painful, especially in the last few weeks since I have been back in this hut. For now uncertainty awoke in me. You may smile perhaps and wonder what marvelous thing I was expecting. It is difficult to put into words. I am not crazy enough to think of marriage. And for anyone else, a night like that might have been just one adventure among many. But then he couldn't have felt it like I did. It was too beautiful, too great and deep to have been a sin. Even the pastor would have to believe me.

"There I am working myself up again, using big words which don't suit me. And yet today I know that it was all only a superficial adventure—on her part. Day after day I waited, being poisoned more and more by the thorn of my disappointment. Just as you found me this evening, I've been standing in front of my hut every evening, waiting and hoping, till it was quite dark. She never came. I should have driven my herd down to winter quarters long ago, but I couldn't force myself to believe it. Every morning I drove my cattle onto the bare pastures. They are getting thin because of this—

"No, I won't think badly of her. I mustn't. But I have had to realize once again that we are different from you, slower, perhaps more stupid, if you like. And I suppose it's too much to expect people to take this into account.

"Today I finally made up my mind to move down to the valley tomorrow. And it would be today, when I was waiting for the last time outside my hut, that a figure appeared at the edge of the forest. But it was—"

"It was only me," I finished for him, this time without smiling.

LESS than two months later, our unit was called up for active service again. Naturally, I was particularly on the lookout for Sapper Nägeli at the place of assembly. To my surprise, although his three comrades were there, the "cheese tiger" was not.

"At the station he ran off without saying a word," one of the mountain fellows explained to me. "No one knows where he went."

The company formed ranks, the corporal read the roll call, but the name "Nägeli Arnold" was followed by deep silence. When there was no sign of him by evening, I began to get anxious. Had he perhaps become more deeply entangled in his unhappy affair? How could we know what thoughts were seething in him?

The military police looked for him in vain. But at noon the following day he came back on his own. Without looking to right or left he went straight to the company office. No one found out where he had spent the last twenty-four hours, but by evening the whole company knew that he had been given six days in the guardhouse. And I heard the captain storm: "The stubbornness of these fellows! They're worse than mules. Not a word did I get out of him."

Some time later, when the "cheese tiger" had finished his six days' arrest, he suddenly came up beside me during a night march. "It wasn't right, what I told you," he said under his breath. "I should have known that she wasn't that kind. It was only that she was forced to postpone her holiday till the winter."

"Have you seen her?" I asked, as surprised as I was curious.

He nodded. "When I came out of the station with the others, I suddenly saw her on the other side of the road. The other fellows couldn't know, of course, why I ran off so suddenly. But I knew. And you know"—he grabbed hold of my arm—"this time I didn't wait, nor did she. Those six days in the guardhouse, I've deserved them. But even if I had been faced with six years, it would have made no difference. You see? We can be like that too!" Out of the darkness I heard a low, deep chuckle.

In this period of service, Sapper Nägeli was never again guilty of the slightest irregularity. And one day I heard our captain say: "These people from the end of the world are among our best soldiers and compatriots. But they are so hard to handle that it is best to leave them the way they are. You can't bend a tree trunk."